NEWS AND NOTES OF PLAYS AND PLAYERS

Alice Joyce Pays The Price of Aristocracy

By Virginia Tracy

It must be twelve years or more since "The Third Degree" was first produced. We wonder if people in general have forgotten it as the play in which Helen Ware and Wallace Eddinger made sensational hits? A play about a pleasantly worthless young gentleman, the heir to great wealth and position, whose first name we remember as Howard and who married Annie Sands, a waitress; who was afterward supposed, even by himself, to have committed a murder, but was comforted, protected and saved by his waitress wife; the wife, for her part, unarmed by any particular good looks, by a dollar in her pocket or by so much as grammar in her mouth, winning out against the world and Howard's family, and even Howard, by nothing whatever except the strength and the stubbornness of her love.

We remember having been worked up by the third degree scene to a degree far beyond any third; to a point, in fact, where we had to wrench our gaze from the stage and lower it to our programme lest we should rise and ask the audience whether it intended to stand for the police treating that boy that way or whether it would follow us to the rescue. We had, besides, recently read an article on third degree methods which stated that a common form of extracting a confession from a nervous person was to shut him in a room with a rat until he confessed. Now the young gentleman on the stage being obviously a highly nervous person and we being by this time fairly fit to qualify in the same class, we could not shed the idea of a rat presently climbing into somebody's lap, most likely ours. Fortunately, the tension on the stage broke just before ours did or no one might have been able to stop us from confessing our whole black past.

A Play Which Wears Well

We cannot pretend that Vitagraph's picture of "The Third Degree" affects us in these more callous days to the same pitch. We realize what a musician, in a brass band way, Klein must have been when, after so many years, we so much miss the contrast and conflict of varied voices—even in a scenario which keeps such complete good faith with its original and moves so interestingly and dramatically from beginning to end. But we realize also how good it is to get hold of the much scoffed at "well-made" play again and feel how taut and reliable a rope it makes through that rather sloppy and weak but treacherous surf where so many up-to-date dramas, ill enough made to suit the most twenty-first-century critic, too frequently struggle and drown. After all, one does not write a "Redemption" merely by writing without form, and to see "The Third Degree" after a stretch of the usual shoddy is to feel as you might about a house with a sound snug roof to it after you have been living under a leak. But we were even more grateful because the picture discovered to us that we were not, as we have sometimes feared, the victim of a fixed idea.

It may be that in the past those hordes of devoted readers whom our fancy loves to picture bent every Sunday in rapt attention above these columns have observed in them a tendency—the tendency to proclaim that good acting is forever being offered up as a burnt sacrifice to bad parts. We had continually presented the career of the actor as one long vigilance of artistic devotion, pouring jewels into bags made of materials too flimsy to hold them, wan with longing for the opportunity to give us the depth, the truth, the emotion, the variety and accomplishment of his soul's endeavor, but forever martyred by the meagre falseness of his part to make a movie holiday. Well, now we have something else to proclaim.

The Actor Not Always Martyred

Here in Annie Sands is a girl all humility, temper and slang, all wistfulness, pride, humor, clumsiness and passion and humanity; here is the very part strong enough and deep enough to hold all the jewels which the actress can pour into it, and this time it is the part which is sacrificed to Miss Joyce's preference for quiet elegance and to her apparent sense that when all else is lost one may at least behave with propriety.

We are perfectly aware that Miss Joyce has the cold chill of logic on her side. There is no reason why Annie should not behave with propriety. It is true, too, that in America very small wage earners wear up-to-date and fetching suits, even if these are not, so far as we can observe, suits breathing the last word of cut and of cunning simplicity, such as Miss Joyce's Annie has had the discretion to provide herself with. Howard would surely have far more reason to fall in love with a well groomed, distinguished-looking, distinguished-mannered girl who beats the ladies of his class all hollow at their own game than with a mere fresh-looking, bouncing and perhaps even boisterous waitress—every reason, except the reason why the play was written.

The truth is that Miss Joyce has no sympathy with Annie. Not, of course, because Annie is poor, nor altogether because she is ignorant. But because she has no sense of dignity.

Annie Gives Way to Alice Joyce

This sense of dignity is rooted in the very depths of Miss Joyce's work and of her personality. Any heroine she plays, while in no need to be a class aristocrat, must be a personal aristocrat. Annie is no kind of aristocrat whatever. So when Annie and Miss Joyce meet they do not mingle. Somebody has to go to the wall.

You would imagine that this must be Annie. Because you think of Annie, first and last, as helpless. When she sits there before the lawyer's door, waiting to capture the greatest defender in the world for her Howard, though without any money to capture him with, the patient figure in its respectable, careful, clumsy dowdiness, with its bare hands folded in its passive lap, strikes you as being as helpless as a log. Before the mean and shallow baseness of Howard's family she is more like a helpless blunderbus, and that terrible, sodden crying she breaks into when her defence of Howard loses a point is the very weltering of a helpless heart.

Now, nobody less helpless than Miss Joyce can possibly be imagined. Nor anybody less inclined to welter. She has the essential elegance of all quite secure and balanced natures, and from that standpoint she plays the part. When she enters the proud portals of Howard's family mansion does she stumble or quail? Far from it. She glances at his advancing relatives with an air that says: "These people are probably purseproud and vulgar, but I at least am a lady and shall refrain from taking offence until it is given." The delicate suppleness of her wrist in her elegantly gloved hand is enough to rebuke any doubt as to her social standing. In her interviews with that reluctant but great lawyer which are life and death to Annie Miss Joyce wears a fur swung at the jauntiest angle of the latest fashion, as though she could not sufficiently disconnect herself from Annie's desperate deportment. She is never otherwise so false as that. She has sympathy with weakness when it clings to her for aid, but she can conceive of it only as something which she must stiffen with her own force; she cannot identify herself with it. Nor does she seem in the least to wish to. She has no use for sodden crying nor clumsy movements. Consequently, the relation between Howard and Annie soon changes—the question ceases to be how a good but weak little soul like Howard can eventually face the world with so common, however devoted, a wife; what the question becomes is how this grave Diana is ever going to put up with so commonplace a person as Howard.

Part Wins Against Acting

Now, this would be bad enough if Miss Joyce in refusing characterization contributed an even greater gift of emotional wisdom. But in refusing to abandon herself to Annie she seems unable to abandon herself at all. It is true that she can do nothing without lovely moments, without flashes of force and fire and charm, but she has no deep tide of feeling on which to float the picture; there is concern in her work, but no heartbreak, no humor, no sense of profound humanity. It seems a high price to pay for aristocracy, no matter how personal.

So poor Annie has a sort of revenge. In the greatness of her heart she is not so helpless after all. The part fights dead against the acting of it just as bravely and wins just as piteous and admirable a partial triumph as we are accustomed to see actors fight and wind dead against their parts. And, as Annie would be glad to know, Howard at least does not suffer. He is so safe in the hands of Mr. Gladden James that not an inflection, either of emotion or of character, remains unrealized. If Mr. James had also scorned weakness and lack of dignity, how much picture would have been left us?

New Midnight Show In Preparation

Only two more weeks remain for the current series of the Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic atop the New Amsterdam Theatre. A new Midnight Frolic is in preparation.

Henry Hull Constance Binney and Lucia Moore in "39 East"

Harris to Produce English Play About Lincoln

It is curious that a visualization of the Great Emancipator is to come to us from an Englishman, and that England has been the first to see and praise it. Few plays of the last season have been more widely discussed than John Drinkwater's play, "Abraham Lincoln," which has been running in London since February 20.

The play has been acquired by William Harris, jr., who plans to mount it here in the fall. It is also to be published in July by the Houghton Mifflin Company, with an introduction by Arnold Bennett. One of the points of interest about the play is the manner in which literary men of importance have stepped forward to make it known. Mr. Bennett even took a hand in its production, and has sung its praises with such gusto in the London press that it has aroused the keenest anticipation here.

"Abraham Lincoln" was written during the summer of 1918 by Mr. Drinkwater, in Birmingham, where he had been directing a most interesting repertory company for about twelve years. He introduced the play through this company on October 12. "With much doubling of parts," said an acount in "The Boston Transcript," "it was cast from the company of the house and framed in settings simple even to bareness and baldness. The piece quickly won attention, not only in Birmingham, but also in London." It was transferred to London in February, but gecause all theatres in the West End were at a premium in the midst of a most remarkable season, the Birmingham company had to take refuge in whatever house was available, and only the Lyric Opera House of Hammersmith, a suburb, was available. Mr. Drinkwater put on two other plays first, each having short runs, and then mounted "Abraham Lincoln" as simply as in Birmingham.

In an account of the play which appeared in "The Review" William Archer writes: "The most remarkable success of recent years has been that of John Drinkwater's 'Abraham Lincoln.' The play was produced at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, of which Mr. Drinkwater is manager. Then it was brought to the Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith, a tawdry little suburban theatre, in which, by the way, Arnold Bennett is interested. It was intended to run for a fortnight, or perhaps three weeks, and, behold, it took the town by storm."

As to the nature of the play, that is best revealed in a criticism written by Henry Nevinson in "The Manchester Guardian" at the time of the original performance: "The action is not divided into acts, but displayed in six successive scenes, covering, with intervals, the years from Lincoln's acceptance of nomination to the Presidency up to the final tragedy of his assassination. Before each scene two stately figures of women appear as a kind of chorus, expounding in alternate passages the purport of the next action. They are perhaps more like the exponents in an old morality play than a Greek chorus. Their absolute repose and freedom from gesture was a little relief from the method of most recitation.

"A large number of characters appear in succession—Lincoln's wife, his servant, some women friends or enemies, his ministers, generals, soldiers, a negro rescued from slavery, a young sentry under sentence of death and others besides. But the whole interest and substance of the play are centred upon the personality of Lincoln himself. As the chronicler or chorus says at the beginning of the play, it is a drama of character. We are shown Lincoln just as we should like to imagine him, and as we believed he was—rugged, indifferent to appearance, tender-hearted, humorous, sensitive to the feelings of others and sympathetic with every noble passion, but firm in resolve and immovable from the line which once he has decided upon as just or magnanimous. We see him surrounded, as every high-hearted statesman is, by advocates of compromise, advocates of cruelty, treacherous friends and intimate enemies. His loneliness and secure stability are the points which strike us most."

Olin Howland

Several years ago, in some play in which Robert Warwick was appearing, there was a scene in a cafe, with a drunken old man sitting at a table in a corner. The old man hadn't a word to say, but somehow or other people used to find their eyes stealing in his direction, until Mrs. Warwick prudently placed herself each night between him and the audience so that the star's speech might receive undivided attention.

That drunken old man was a youngster by the name of Olin Howland, brother of the beautiful Jobyna, and smitten with the stage fever from his babyhood. The tall, thin comedian, who is now apppearing in "She's a Good Fellow," has a happy faculty of infusing every part in which he appears with an odd personal flavor.

Olin Howland was born in Denver, and although his taste for the theatre manifested itself early—he made his debut at the age of six as the dormouse in a Christmas production of "Alice in Wonderland—nevertheless the family managed to keep him in school until he reached the age of eighteen, when his father led him down to a big railroad office where he had secured a clerical position for the young hopeful.

Meanwhile, without his family's consent, Olin had been attending Margaret Fealy's dramatic school, along with Douglas Fairbanks and other future celebrities, "suping" with the Bellow's stock company, and even occasionally playing small speaking parts. The taste for grease paint and footlights was firmly established, and when he glanced in the railroad office and saw 100 young men with their backs humped over clicking typewriters he turned on his heel and fled, declaring in no uncertain terms that never would he become of their ilk.

The next step, of course, was New York. And since beginners are always confident of success, Howland was in nowise surprised when David Belasco offered him a part in "The Warrens of Virginia." It was a thinking part, that of a starving soldier, and as he looks back the young comedian confesses that it was probably his six feet two of emaciated anatomy which secured him the position. At that time he had a great ambition to secure a place in the world of musical comedy, and haunted managers' offices for a tryout. But he never got beyond the first two notes in the scale, and frankly admits that one or two positions in the chorus which he secured were due entirely to friendly stage directors and not to a beautiful voice.

Just at this time, six years ago, dancing became the rage, and Howland, always an enthusiast, decided to take up ball room dancing. With Cynthia Perot he worked out a series of new dances and the two appeared for two years in Shanley's. Then, following in the footsteps of the Castles, he went to Paris with Hannah Leach as a dancing partner. They arrived in Paris early in that summer of dance-madness of 1914, and were engaged to dance in five different revues and cabarets each night. Contracts in various European cities followed, and after a brief stay in Berlin, the pair were appearing at the Villa Roda in Petrograd when war was declared. In the few weeks that followed, before they were able to crawl into the steerage of a vessel homeward bound, Howland declares that he mastered the entire art of pantomime, trying to converse with frightened moujiks and angry soldiers, thereby fitting himself effectively for his future stage career.

On his return to this country Howland decided to abandon dancing for acting, and appeared for a summer with Lew Fields in "All Aboard." Then came an opportunity to understudy De Wolf Hopper in the all star cast of the Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company, after which there was a brief return to dancing in "Watch Your Step," where Howland took the place of Vernon Castle, whom he closely resembles.

Jerome Kern's influence secured for Howland his first opportunity to play a really characteristic part—that of Bub Hicks in "Leave It to Jane." His success in this part led to his engagement in "She's a Good Fellow." In the meanwhile, to leave nothing untouched, Howland has found time to appear in nine moving pictures of the series written and directed by James Montgomery Flagg.

At the Summer Amusement Parks

Luna Park has disclosed itself in all its glitter to the amusement seeker. A new Chinese illusion show, dancing exhibitions in Shimmy Land and the Shrine of Diana, and two war spectacles, "The Last Shot" and "The Submarine F-7," are the present season's novelties.

The outdoor and indoor swimming pools in Steeplechase, which are open day and night, have proved a great attraction at this resort.

A tabloid musical comedy, "Shimmyland," is one of the features of the Bronx Exposition. Other attractions there are the scenic railways, the whirlpools, the swimming pool and the Venetian Canal.

A new ride for the delight of Palisade Park patrons is called "The Beehive." The sea water surf bathing is a popular attraction at this resort.

Benefit for the MacDonald Players

A special performance for the benefit of the Duncan MacDougall Barn Players will be given at the Cohan & Harris Theatre to-night. The Players will appear in their own bill of three short plays—"Crainquebille," by Anatole France; "The Gollywog's Holiday," by Duncan MacDougall, and "The Tinker's Wedding," by J. M. Synge.

Dorothy Dickson At Century Roof

Dorothy Dickson and Carl Hyson will join the Morris Gest Century Midnight Whirl to-morrow night by special arrangement with Cohan and Harris. They are also appearing in "The Royal Vagabond" at the Cohan and Harris Theatre. Among the other favorites who continue in the roof revue are Gordon and William Dooley, Rosie Quinn, the Rath Brothers, Phil Baker, Julia Ballew and Earl Benham.